

The greater jail: The politics of prison in Syria

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In a talk co-organized by the assassinated activist Lokman Slim, former Syrian political prisoner Yassin al-Haj Saleh argues that "the politics of prison" are central to understanding the "politicide" of the Syrian people at the Assad regime's hands.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh

[Editor's note: The below has been adapted from a talk given by the author on 10 November, 2020, at an event co-organized by the University of Cologne and the MENA Prison Forum founded by the activists [Lokman Slim](#) and [Monika Borgmann](#), who attended the online discussion. Slim was [assassinated](#) earlier this month in Lebanon. The author dedicates the text to his memory.]

[Author's note: I suppose I was approached by the organizers of this event to give this talk about prison and political violence because they imagined I was an "authority" on the subjects, and it would be quite easy for me to talk about them. It is not. It has never been. In fact, it is even harsher now, after the last crushing decade. My personal experience is already prehistoric, and the ongoing history is in need of fresh thinking, language, and sensitivity: not a very easy task, but it deserves to be given a try. Our diasporic condition suggests that a new approach might be made possible by inserting our traumatizing experiences, old and new, into a broader context of similar experiences. The fundamental weakness of our Syrian "prison literature" is that it is

imprisoned in Syria; never referring to other literatures. It seems that traumas, whether individual or collective, tie people to their own stories, always thought (mistakenly) to be unique. If the concept of trauma had a tongue, it would declare its uniqueness, and claim to be an absolute beginning. This must be resisted, and the diasporic condition makes resistance possible. I do believe that the literature we have produced could be read as expressions of fixation around our traumatizing experiences; resistance to them; and healing efforts.

In the below talk, I pointed to some elements of this broader context, aiming at “de-provincializing” the Syrian condition (I borrow the term from my friend Joachim Häberlen) in what looks more and more to be a Syrianized world.]

Allow me, first, to state some basic temporal observations about Syria. The Assad family has been ruling the country for half a century; already longer than the GDR's reign in East Germany, and the time of apartheid in South Africa. In these five decades, Syria has witnessed two internal wars, aside from its 1973 war with Israel: the first Syrian war (SWI) of 1979-1982; and the second Syrian war (SWII), which has now been ongoing for almost ten years—about the same as WWI and WWII combined. In the context of SWI, tens of thousands spent periods in jail longer than the entire Third Reich era of German history. I was one of them. The victims of SWII number in the hundreds of thousands, amounting to perhaps 3% of the total population killed, and an unknown number of people arrested, tortured, and disappeared. During the trial currently underway in Germany's Koblenz, a Syrian gravedigger spoke in his testimony (<https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/grave-atrocities>) about “millions” of corpses. I cannot vouch for this number myself, but I do believe we don't really know the full range of torture victims. In

a report released in August 2020, the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated the number of forcibly-disappeared persons in Syria at close to 100,000. I, for one, fear many of them are no longer alive.

Moreover, the dynastic rule of the Assads is guaranteed, for the time being, now that it has become an openly de-nationalized Russian-Iranian protectorate. After all this bloodshed, this shift may reinvigorate the regime, and extend the lifetime of its killing machine for another generation or more.

But what was it in the first place that led to this complex and chronic national and citizenship crisis in the oldest Arab republic?

In part, it was the politics of prison, where prison is a fundamental political institution, the function of which is to de-politicize the population; indeed to *politicide* them. The concept of *politicide* was introduced in political science in the 1980s to conceptualize murdering people en masse for their political affiliations, rather than for the national, ethnic, racial, or religious identities mentioned in the Genocide Convention adopted by the UN in 1948. However, I apply the concept to the murder of people politically, with or without also murdering them physically. Throughout the 1980s in Syria, both forms of *politicide* were practiced: the leftists were killed politically, while the Islamists were killed both politically and as a political community. Yet to say this is to risk masking the fact that all Syrians at large were also subjected to *politicide*. There was scarcely a single Syrian who did not experience the regime's security apparatus in some form; whether they were summoned to one of the sprawling archipelago of

- security branches, or underwent a "security study" while at university, or when applying for a job, or a passport. The (in)famous "wall of fear" is internalized fear, taking the form of a solid barrier that separates people, at times even within the same family.

Yet prison is only one component of an all-encompassing complex: torture, rape, massacres, and disappearances are other methods of politicide practiced—always with full impunity for the perpetrators.

The word “jail” itself can be misleading in the Syrian context. One might differentiate between outer jails and inner jails, in parallel with the differentiation between outer and inner states. (The former is primarily the government, which lacks real power, while the latter is a political-financial-security complex representing the true seat of power.) The outer jails are those in which inmates’ relatives know their whereabouts, and may even visit them regularly. In these jails, physical punishment is rare. The inmates of inner jails, by contrast, are fully separated from the outside world; their whereabouts unknown to their families, who don’t even know if they are dead or alive. In these jails, the hungry and hopeless inmates are tortured at random. They are not jails at all, in fact, but torture and extermination camps. They were the habitat of most Islamists. In the years of Assad *père*, the inner prison/camp was Tadmor, while in his son’s era it has been Saydnaya. Muslimiyah and Adra are outer jails. Elsewhere, people are also incarcerated in the security branches for periods of weeks, months, or even years. The veteran communist Riad al-Turk spent seventeen and a half years in one such place. After the uprising in 2011, these too became killing fields.

Indeed, after 2011, the inner jail system became the norm. Now, detainees may be ordinary people, neither affiliates nor sympathizers of political parties. The terrible story of Omar Alshogre deserves to be seen and heard by everybody (there are plenty of videos about him [on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=omar+alshogre) (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=omar+alshogre)). This teenager from the village of al-Bayda in Tartous governorate—which was the site of a large massacre in May 2013, when some 250 civilians were butchered by

pro-regime militants—was arrested no fewer than seven times. His final detention was in the notorious Saydnaya prison, where he spent three years. He was only released after his mother paid 20,000 US dollars to a security officer. His father, two of his brothers, and many of his cousins were all killed in massacres, or under torture in prison. Today he is still just 25, in his first year at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

For the benefit of those who know little about Syrian politics in the Baathist era, one might mention in passing another political institution in the country, represented by the so-called National Progressive Front that was established in 1972, ostensibly as an umbrella for political participation. In effect, this golden jail was merely a parallel form of political death, added to the archipelago of detention centers. The difference was that this apparatus was for those who showed readiness to commit self-extermination. I mention this worthless institution only to say that Syria at large was a giant prison even before the uprising in 2011, and all the more so thereafter. Nobody lived outside of this jail, including the regime loyalists.

This metaphor of the giant prison, or greater jail, was seemingly introduced after so many people were released from prisons. It implies a widespread experience in smaller jails; the many prisons in which Syrians from various backgrounds spent years. It means also that prisoners were in fact never released; the release of political prisoners was merely a transition from one cell to another, albeit a far larger one. The regime itself was keen to depict it this way, by talking about a “presidential amnesty” every time someone was let go. You are not out of jail because this is your right, but because the merciful fatherly president has deigned to pardon you.

The greater jail also means that getting out of a smaller jail is not a story of freedom, or a victory for those struggling for a Syria without political imprisonment. Another implication is that jail is

no longer an exception; an unfortunate experience that strikes a minority of people. It became the rule, the general law under which the entire population lives.

The greater jail captures well the Syrian condition of politicide. I heard this expression from Riad al-Turk, who spent his days in solitary confinement. But it appears to exist in the Egyptian context as well. The young Egyptian writer and ex-prisoner Ahmed Naji referred to his country as a greater jail in his recent book, *Hirz Mkamkim*. The structures of the political imaginary tend to be identical in the Arab world.

After the Syrian uprising, the aforementioned politicidal complex of detention, torture, rape, massacres, and disappearance has acquired far more brutality than it had in the first round—the SWI. It has turned into what Jules Etjim calls a thanatocracy (<https://julesetjim.medium.com/notes-on-syria-and-the-coming-global-thanatocracy-51e8b94c0f10>); rule by the production of the violent death of the ruled. What one must conclude from the politicidal complex is that the Syrian experience over the past half-century does not belong to the general category of oppression, or dictatorship, or even the post-Stalinist form of Soviet totalitarianism. Instead, it belongs in the exterminatory category; that of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. This is important, because prior to the Syrian uprising, we tended to think of Syria as merely a semi-totalitarian regime, like the GDR. It took us several years after the uprising to re-think these issues, and we have still not developed the literature to position Syria within the context of genocidal and exterminatory states. This line of thought and sensitivity deserves more attention from us Syrians in the diaspora.

The idea of a greater jail, and lifelong imprisonment therein, must be kept in mind in order to understand the huge Syrian exodus starting 2013 to countries close to Syria and further away. This exodus came after the window of hope that was opened by the

Syrian uprising for a year or two was decisively closed.

Approximately 30% of the population fled the country, and it is quite certain that even more would leave if they had the chance. The country has become a homeland of homelessness and hopelessness, with not even the slightest promise of justice. A whole half-century without change; an eternity; is a fountain of very heavy despair.

What the various different sites of the Syrian geography of terror all have in common is that you are denied the slightest knowledge about your fate. Either you are never brought to court, or it happens only after many long years of detention. Even if you get a sentence, there is no guarantee you'll be released when it is finished. Jail has never been a legal institution in Assad's Syria; it is a political one, with an inherent unpredictability being an integral

part of its politics. The regime is designed in a way that denies the population the ability to predict and plan for their future, occupying for them the role of an unreadable deity. The terrorist impact of not knowing what will happen to you; the absolute unpredictability; has always been a very powerful method of politicide. It has a destructive impact on families and societal ties, in addition to its yield of despair.

I conclude by returning to the temporal observations made at the beginning, to give an idea about the structure of time in the greater jail. The observations give an impression of slow time, marked by absence of change. In truth, the Syrian *abad* (eternity) is achieved by a dynamic of *ta'beed*: eternalizing. There are great differences between exterminatory and "merely" oppressive regimes, and the politics of eternity are an essential example. In Arabic, there is an etymological connection between *abad* (eternity) and *ibada* (extermination); an observation that supports a hypothesis that staying in power forever is impossible without a permanent threat of massacres, each one larger than the last, in a process leading inexorably to yet larger ones. This is perhaps an

additional difference between the politics of extermination and “merely” dictatorial government.

Through *abad* and the greater jail, the Assadist thanatocracy has created hitherto unimagined possibilities for politicizing people; a fact which has already empowered other juntas ruling in the Middle East, and rendered popular movements even weaker. Sisi’s Egypt is on the same path.

Throughout these 50 years, or rather 57 years (96% of Syrians are under 60), Syrians have lived in a peculiar kind of present; unable to foresee the future, and denied any promise of change, on the one hand, while on the other hand unable to forgive, not only because they have not been invited to, but also because of the unpunishable nature of the crimes committed against them (I refer here to Hannah Arendt). It is like being besieged by two of Walter Benjamin’s angels of history; one preventing the past from passing, and another preventing the future from arriving. This is the structure of time in absolute or inner jails, where the space is shut out of the world, and time weighs crushingly heavy over the inmates.

However, it is not a matter of the absence of change in Syria, but rather the absence of Syrians from change. In the last decade, Syria has changed far more than we wanted, and than the regime ever thought it would. And the process of change is still ongoing. What is more sinister than this change is this insidious continuity of the exterminatory machine, and the fact we cannot promise ourselves, nor hope for anybody to promise us, that the woes we have suffered are the worst we will suffer; that the worst is behind us. The words “never again” are still yet to be said in Syria.